



WORDS: DAVID WILDGOOSE

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11 NOW, VOYAGER

DATE 1942 **DVD DISTRIBUTOR** WARNER VISION
RELEASED NOW STARRING BETTE DAVIS, PAUL HENREID, CLAUDE RAINS, GLADYS COOPER, JANIS WILSON, BONITA GRANVILLE, ILKA CHASE



THE STORY

CHARLOTTE VALE IS A WOMAN ON THE verge of a nervous breakdown. An unwanted daughter, the only girl of four children, Charlotte is not so much raised as brutally diminished by her domineering mother. Clumsy, badly dressed and overweight her self-esteem has been completely shattered. But hope comes in Dr Jaquith, a psychiatrist of nationwide renown. The modern miracle of therapy has the desired effect, and soon Charlotte books herself aboard a cruise ship bound for South America. Enter Jerry Durrance, a man of the world, ready and willing to teach the former "ugly duckling" how to become a swan. The pair duly fall in love, yet Jerry is married (albeit unhappily) and they cannot remain together. Soon Charlotte returns home to confront her mother, who succumbs to a heart attack during a heated argument.

THE SUBTEXT

NOW, VOYAGER CONVEYS A CURIOUS thematic mix of messages. On the surface, it seems to present a predictable retelling of the hackneyed "ugly duckling" fairy tale. A brief stay on the shrink's couch and a new hairstyle later, and suddenly Charlotte is a new, sexually predatory woman. Her all-too-quick transformation from mouse to minx is portrayed in less than convincing fashion, although that is certainly understandable with someone as remarkable as Bette Davis in the lead role. Yet, probe a little deeper, and more complex concepts emerge. That Charlotte and Jerry fail to get together in the end is the inevitable conclusion. While, as a single woman, Charlotte is allowed glimpses of happiness, she cannot fulfil her potential. She has, after all, gone against the moral grain and resigns herself to being a mistress and a surrogate mother to Jerry's little girl.

FACT FILE

- The title of the film was lifted from a poem by Walt Whitman, entitled *Leaves of Grass*. The complete line is: "Untold Want, By Life and Land Ne'er Granted, Now, Voyager, Sail Thou Forth to Seek and Find"
- Irving Rapper was not the studio's first choice to direct the film. Original director Edmund Goulding pulled out through illness, while second in line Michael Curtiz fell out with star Bette Davis. Apparently,

when she signed on to star, she informed Producer Hal B. Wallis that she would not work with Curtiz.

■ Casey Robinson's screenplay was based upon the best-selling novel of the same name by Olive Higgins Prouty.

■ Acclaimed, veteran composer Max Steiner won an Oscar for the film's musical score. He is better known for his work on the soundtrack to *Gone with the Wind*.

KEY PLAYERS

BETTE DAVIS WAS AT THE PEAK OF HER reign in Hollywood when she made *Now, Voyager* but it remained an unusually sympathetic role for an actress who had made her name as tough, uncompromising women. It followed hot on the heels of the actress' most memorable works, *Jezebel* (1938), *Dark Victory* (1939) and *The Letter* (1940). It wouldn't be until *All About Eve* in 1950 that Davis would get a role as challenging and juicy as Charlotte Vale's journey from mousey spinster to confident, independent woman. Directing her was Irving Rapper, an English director for whom *Now, Voyager* was only his third film. He does a solid job but it is Max Steiner's melodramatic score that provides the emotion bubbling beneath the surface of Vale's suppressed exterior. Co-starring were Claude Rains and Paul Henreid who, in the same year, would both appear in *Casablanca*.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

CIGARETTES. CIGARETTES. AND MORE cigarettes. If awards were granted to films for the way they encouraged smoking, *Now, Voyager* would take home a carton. In the early part of the film, Charlotte's repression is characterised by her furtive drags on a durry and paranoid stash in her desk drawer. However, as she blossoms, the way she conducts herself whilst smoking reflects her self-confidence coming to the fore. Charlotte swoons at the attention given her by Jerry when he first lights her cigarette. When he does it a second time, in the ship's lounge, she's now aware of the sexual power inherent in such an intimate gesture. Finally, in the film's most memorable scene, their relationship is consummated when Jerry lights two cigarettes in his mouth, before handing one to Charlotte. Phwoar...! "Cigarette, anyone?"